

Learning While Doing: Conducting Oral Histories in Class

Wendy Soltz

Ball State University

Lars Arceneaux

Ball State University

Claire Matney

Ball State University

Halle Pressler

Ball State University

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In Spring 2023, I worked with 24 Ball State University students enrolled in HIST 240: “Introduction to Public History” to practice oral history methods. Ball State is a R2 public university in Muncie, Indiana with an approximately 15,000 undergraduate student body that is 76% white. I teach the course every spring that is divided into fourteen units that focus on the various subfields and methods of Public History. I usually bring in guest speakers and take the class on short fieldtrips on campus and in town, but this year the students got the opportunity to directly work with the public.

In Fall 2022, I was approached by the Fort Wayne Historic Preservation, Neighborhood Planning and Activation, and Parks Departments to help create an oral history-based video for the Jennings Center, a mostly Black youth center in operation since 1948 (the center was actually open since the 1920s, though under a different name). The oral history recordings would help to document the life of the center and its impact on the East Central Neighborhood. Students worked with Fort Wayne City staff to develop questions and learn about the project from the “client’s” point of view and to learn about the history of the center and oral history best practices. The 24 students were divided into twelve groups and each pair was assigned an individual to interview. We have an Oral History Lab on campus but decided to use Zoom in the Lab to conduct the interviews due to distance between Muncie and Fort Wayne. The students could decide amongst themselves who would be the interviewer, and who would be the support person and complete the transcription work.

The recordings will be available to the public via a compilation video on the City of Fort Wayne’s YouTube channel and City TV. The recordings, in their entirety, will be available at the Allen County Public Library and the BSU Archives and Special Collections. In addition, the Parks Department will use the material in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Jennings Center and to nominate the Center to the National Register of Historic Places. Finally, getting the word out to colleagues and other students about the important work we did as a class was essential. I created a bulletin board in the Department of History which lists the student pairs, and includes images of the narrators and excerpts from their interviews (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

While overall the project was successful, we did have a few hiccups. First, I couldn’t be in Fort Wayne and Muncie at the same time. It was difficult to troubleshoot tech problems from afar and it was also hard to offer support to the students without stepping in *too* much. Second, because we were interviewing older Black individuals from Fort Wayne, it was difficult for them to relate to young white students from Muncie. This surfaced mainly from the narrators’ apprehensive statements such as “Well, you’re too young to remember this...” or “Keep in mind, this was a Black neighborhood in the 1950s...” Third, it was difficult for the students to modify their next question based on the narrator’s answer to the previous question. This type of on-the-spot analytical thinking was by far the most difficult for the students to master. Finally, students had to overcome fear and nervousness about being on camera with another individual, a live human being, whom they had never met. The following three essays by actual students in the class shed light on the learning process and the emotions that come with doing public history.



Figure 1: As the Director of the Public History Program here at Ball State, it was important to me to showcase the work my students accomplished on campus. This bulletin board is in a prominent spot in the Department of History and is seen by faculty, staff, students, and prospective students and their families.



Figure 2: Oral histories produce qualitative results. In order to provide passersby with a snapshot of the types of information the class collected, I extracted and compiled short quotes along with a brief overview of the project. Images of the narrators and the students' names as interviewers reinforce the personal and local aspects of "doing" history in this way

History in the Making: an Oral History Reflection **Lars Arceneaux, Ball State University**

I was called to study history. While I originally began my academic career at Ball State as an architecture student, the program did not end up suiting me. Between conversations with my friends and family, I realized that my true passion was in the field of history. I was initially intimidated by this change; I had already spent a year and a half in another program and was afraid of being behind my peers, but through the many excellent professors and courses, I will be graduating earlier than I would have had I stuck with architecture. While I am still not completely certain of what my career path will look like, Ball State's History Department has helped me navigate my options, especially in the field of public history. Studying public history, I've learned that there is much more to history and understanding the past than academia.

Dr. Wendy Soltz's Spring 2023 "Introduction to Public History" class has shown me a wide variety of career opportunities including but not limited to museum curators, archivists, oral historians, cultural resource managers, government historians/policy advisors, film and media producers, historical interpreters, local historians, and historic preservationists. The course has provided a solid understanding of the opportunities and responsibilities that each of these careers offer. Taking notes during lectures and reading from textbooks and other class materials is essential in learning any subject, but being able to apply that knowledge to real-world scenarios is the key to success. For my Public History class, we joined the Jennings Center Oral History Project to help facilitate their needs while also enriching our understanding and skills in public history. The project had students partner up to conduct an interview with a member of the Jennings Center to record the interviewee's history and experiences with the center to show the significance of the building and the impact it has on Fort Wayne's East Central Neighborhood.

Prior to taking this course, I had little experience with conducting an interviewinterviews outside of ones with personal friends, so conducting one with a stranger was a new challenge for me as a student. During one class session, students were broken up into small groups to begin creating a list of the best practices to follow for oral history, a timeline for the history of the Jennings Center, as well as seven potential interview questions for the project. This part of the project was split evenly before we decided which roles we would take in the interview. My partner Sophia White agreed to be the main interviewer and would write the thank-you letter while I would take care of the transcript.

I also wanted to make sure that I attended the interview so that I would be able to take notes and help Sophia if she got stuck on any parts of the interview, which proved to be useful in a couple of instances during the interview, including stepping in to ask the interviewee, Michael Ayers, a few questions. The interview was a slightly nerve-racking experience as, while I did not have to be in the interviewer's seat, I was still anxious for my partner as I know how difficult it can be talking to strangers. this was both of our first times interviewing a complete stranger. Even though I was not in the interviewer's seat, it can be awkward and uncomfortable talking with a stranger for an hour- especially with the added stress of the interview being for a grade. However, once you realize that both you and the person you're interviewing are bound to make a mistake or take a minute to pause and think, the experience becomes significantly less stressful. Sophia and I were also the first group to go, which meant the setup process for connecting to Zoom and hooking up the microphone took a bit of time. The interview itself went relatively smoothly but did not take the hour we were expected to fill.

On the other hand, the process of creating the transcript took longer than I had initially expected it to. The rough transcript provided by Zoom was around 65 pages long, with frequent disjointed sentences and missed words. However, it was still much easier than it would have been to create the entire script only using the video/audio from the interview. I began by condensing the rough transcript by cutting out the time stamps, while adding the appropriate minute markers, and created blocks of text for each speaker so that they weren't disjointed from one another. Next, I re-watched the interview and went through the transcript to fix any mistakes to add words and sentences that weren't picked up by Zoom. This part was the most time-consuming as the microphones would occasionally have a hard time picking up the sound of the interviewee. Once that was done, I tidied up any

grammatical errors while being true to the interviewer and interviewee's speech patterns; this was different from writing for an academic audience that I had been used to.

Overall, the interview gave us some new insight into the history of the Jennings Center along with putting our lessons on oral history to practical use. One of the most unique and valuable aspects of oral history is its ability to elevate voices that might not otherwise be heard. Historians choose which narratives are shared when discussing the past and which ones are not. As a result, minority groups and marginalized people are often left out of the discussion which is why oral history projects like the one for the Jennings Center is crucial to help broaden our understanding of the past and present. The project required us to use our active listening skills, which includes being attentive to the speaker, paraphrasing what the speaker has said to ensure you are both on the same page, and avoiding judgement, along with and on-the-spot thinking to best curate questions for the narrator. The project also helped my partner and I learn how public history is meant to engage with what the public wants to see in their communities. Knowing that our work will now be a part of a larger project is satisfying to say the least and demonstrates the effectiveness of applying what we learn in the classroom to the real world.

Novice Oral History at Work **Claire Matney, Ball State University**

For Dr. Wendy Soltz's "Introduction to Public History" class we had several interactive learning experiences. The first of many was to work with the City of Fort Wayne and members of the Fort Wayne public in conducting twelve oral history interviews about the East Central Neighborhood, a predominately Black neighborhood in Fort Wayne with its own community and rich history. Our focus was the Jennings Center and the integral part it played in the community.

Originally built as a YMCA, over the years the center has been a home to many children who played basketball and other organized sports there and the adults that came to watch over them and work there. In 1929 the YMCA was built as a community center for the area, then in 1945 a new director took over by the name of Al Jennings was, but in 1948 the McCulloch Center was built to replace the "Y." Jennings was regarded as one of the best directors who presided over the center, he was a man of the community, he befriended everyone who came to the center, and he was also a very generous man, one interviewee had an account of Mr. Jennings paying for her to go to Atlanta for a job opportunity. Robert Starke, Jennings' successor, 1977 renamed the center in dedication to Jennings and all the work he had done for their community.

As a class, we were all assigned an individual member of the public and worked in pairs of two, interviewer and "behind the scene," transcriber. We had to come up with interview questions, that were later finalized by Dr. Soltz and our client, into a list of standard questions everyone was to ask their narrator/interviewee. The idea of doing a project of this scale was really exciting to me, as I had done nothing like this before in any other history class I had taken. What made me the most excited about this project was the real opportunity to work with the public, and to help tell the stories of the people who were a part of the Jennings Center. In addition, this experience has added to my resume. The process of this project was lengthy as coordinating with the Jennings Center and having them facilitate interviews on their side and finding dates that worked for everyone's schedules.

First, we met with the client and talked about the overall idea for the project, what the plan was for the interviews, and help to promote East Central and share the stories of its inhabitants. On February 17 we conducted the interview on the second floor of Burkhardt in the Oral History Lab where students conducted the interviews. The narrator we interviewed was Jacqueline Turner, an 84-year-old woman who has resided in the neighborhood for 63 years along with her husband and now grown daughter, Kellie Turner. Kellie was present for the interview with her mother to assist with helping her answer the questions, some of which she partly answered as well. Together the Turners moved from New London, Connecticut to Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1959 and made a life for themselves there. They were not as involved in the Jennings Center as some of the other citizens interviewed, but the Turners did regularly go to basketball games at the center, chaperoned for dances, and attended the Christmas Wassail, a Jennings Center tradition popular in the community.

By being behind the scenes in this project and taking on the role of the transcriber I learned a lot of valuable skills that I might not have gained if I was in the role of the interviewer. From previous experiences, I was familiar with the work of transcribing various interviews, but that wasn't part of what I gained from the interview. I learned how to watch and listen and this is a transferable skill I could use in any field. By observing the interview and watching what's going on you get a better understanding of the entire story as its unweaving before you which was great because then I was able to piece parts of what people said back together when there was an audio mishap or Ms. Turner mumbled something or switched topics mid-question. Ms. Turner was a little rather hard of hearing so sometimes she would ask repeatedly for the question to be restated and then her daughter would step in and answer it with her or help her with an answer.

Looking back on what this experience in oral history brought me, I didn't realize how impactful it was to me in the beginning but the more and more I reflect on this experience I am very grateful for how it has helped me grow as a historian. With this project, I was able to develop my active listening skills as well as develop my observation skills. One day, I hope to hone these skills in oral history so that I may be a well-rounded public historian.

Benefits of Oral Histories in Challenging Interviews **Halle Pressler, Ball State University**

Throughout my life, learning about history came straight from textbooks or academic papers. Understanding what happened in the past came from secondary sources that described events as simplistic chronologies. College taught me about historical narratives that changed my way of thinking, and even the way I learn, about history. I wanted to dig into primary sources such as old newspapers and journal entries, but these too have their limitations. In my Public History course with Dr. Wendy Soltz, I learned about oral history. Of course, I knew what interviews were, but understanding their importance was a new concept to me. Not only were we just going to learn about oral history, but we were going to practice it.

Dr. Soltz collaborated with the City of Fort Wayne for a historic preservation project. In the East Central neighborhood of Fort Wayne there is a building called the Jennings Center, built in 1948, that has been lacking interest and attendance. This building was a recreation center that children in the neighborhood frequented every day to play, learn, and interact with other children. Students in her Public History course were going to be paired up and assigned one community member that had attended the Jennings Center. We then had to read about the history of the building and the community centered around it. Before the project could actually begin, we had to understand what oral history was.

Dr. Soltz gave a presentation explaining oral history and then assigned readings, such as *The Oral History Manual* by Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, that explained techniques and best practices of oral interviews. She stated that oral history is a field of study that involves interpreting the voices of the past. Oral histories would give a personal perspective of an event, place, or person. Recording these histories and presenting them to the public through interviews allows stories to be told and individual voices to be heard. Most oral histories focus on the average, everyday voice that does not typically get featured in history textbooks. Individual perspectives show how each person experienced and understood an event intellectually and emotionally, which are often left out of academic literature. Most writings and papers on historic topics leave out how people felt in the moment and how they interpret personal experiences. Oral histories bring those emotions to light, especially during oral interviews. Though hearing the emotions is an amazing way to understand the impact of an event or place, they can be tricky to handle during interviews.

My partner, Emily Loney, and I did anticipate that our narrator would probably express intense emotions. To prepare, we practiced the assigned questions and prepared follow-up questions but did not go over how to respond to emotional reactions. Instead, we simply focused on the facts and background information of the Jennings Center and the division of labor. Deciding who was going to question the narrator was a difficult decision as both my partner and I prefer behind-the-scenes work. Many of my fellow students, along with myself, find it hard to just have a conversation with a new person, let alone have it be a formal interview that is graded. After much

back and forth, we decided on my taking on the role of interviewer. The preparation for the interview was nerve-racking. I practiced the questions over and over so that I would not be following the list directly. The experience during the interview and what the narrator was going to say or how he would react was unknown. There is no way to fully prepare for that.

On February 16 I entered the Oral History Lab in the Burkhardt Building on Ball State's campus and was immediately placed before the computer and cued up the microphone for the Zoom call. Dr. Soltz went through the whole setup including the list of questions and the chat she put on the screen so she could pose questions for me to ask. The beginning was nerve-racking and stressful, as this was a new experience for me as well as many of my classmates. I faced many challenges just to get started including the microphone not working, audio going out, and the narrator, Mr. Dixie, not being fully ready to begin as his consent form photo had not been taken yet. When everything was finally ready, I spoke at the speed of light because of my nerves, even though Dr. Soltz repeatedly told all of us students to just slow down. Her reminder in the chat made my voice slow at mid-sentence, and I slowly calmed down and relaxed.

After the rocky introductions, the interview went well. I was apprehensive about my ability to form follow-up questions, but as the interview went on, I developed open-ended questions that elicited more information from the narrator that would expand more on what he was saying. The questions asked focused on the importance of the Jennings Center to Mr. Dixie and the community he lived in. I learned how truly important the building was to him and the impact it had on his life. Toward the end of the interview, he got teary-eyed discussing the man whom the building was named after, Albert Jennings, who had an important role in his life. I internally panicked as he wiped his tears, as I only had a split second to decide the best way to proceed with the interview. I was able to calm myself and ask if he needed a break before we continued. Thinking on my feet allowed us to continue the interview until we ran out of time.

Emotions like Mr. Dixie's showed me what makes oral history interviews so important. I saw how people, places, and events impact people's lives through the raw emotions that showed the depth of their impact. Even though there were challenges throughout the interview, such as sound issues and feeling unprepared for emotional reactions, hearing the emotion behind everything Mr. Dixie said showed me the importance of oral history. Having Mr. Dixie write down his story instead would have lacked the emotions and raw answers of an oral interview. The interview is now in two archives and is being used by the City of Fort Wayne in an attempt to revive the Jennings Center. Hearing how important the Jennings Center has been from a person directly affected by it will hopefully spark a revival in the use and attendance of the Jennings Center.